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In New York, a Web of Intrigue



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Dr. Francesco Pazienza

IN 1981, the year Pope John Paul II was shot in Rome, a new Italian organization surfaced on Park Avenue in New York. Known as "Grand Italia," its goal was to unite 120 million Italians and people of Italian descent in a "second Risorgimento" of worldwide Italian rebirth.

But Grand Italia, which quickly faded from the scene, was nothing more than a "cover" for an Italian intelligence operation in the United States, according to the former official who says he set it up. "My

purpose was to watch discreetly certain Italians supposed to be linked to terrorism," said Dr. Francesco Pazienza, who from 1980 to mid-1981 was in the Italian Information and Military Security Service and a secretive intelligence group called "Super S," and whose name has cropped up in investigations of the Papal shooting.

Last week a Federal judge ruled that Dr. Pazienza, after six months in jail here, should be extradited to his homeland. The judge rejected Dr. Pazienza's contention that he was double-crossed by United States Customs Service agents when he arrived from Mexico for an appointment to volunteer information. The order was stayed pending an appeal, which Dr. Pazienza promised would be rich with detail.

In interviews from the Manhattan Correctional Center, where he has been held on an Italian warrant stemming from the bankruptcy of the Banco Ambrosiano, Dr. Pazienza — a medical school graduate who went into business and geopolitics — has told tales of intelligence operations and secret diplomatic missions that he contends he undertook for the United States and the Vatican.

He has said, for example, that after

leaving the intelligence agency he was pressed back into service to meet with a Neapolitan underworld boss and help win the release of a kidnapped politician. He also said he had kept a dossier on but had never met Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk convicted of shooting the Pope. He denied Mr. Agca's original contention — since denied by the Turk — that he had visited Mr. Agca to get him to implicate the Bulgarians.

As for the Banco Ambrosiano, Dr. Pazienza said he was the first to alert the family of Roberto Calvi that the mysterious banker had disappeared. Mr. Calvi's body was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in London.

The White House denied that Dr. Pazienza had performed any authorized missions. The Vatican refused to comment. American and Italian officials have said that his assertions were difficult to verify, but associates he has named have often confirmed outlines of his accounts, while disputing details. Dr. Pazienza's lawyer, Edward A. Morrison, said that Italian officials had not sought to interview his client in jail but rather wanted him back in Italy "so they can shut him up."

—RALPH BLUMENTHAL